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Ignorant of history

CONGRESSMAN'S STATEMENTS ON INTERNMENT ARE ALARMING

A NORTH Carolina congressman understandably drew San Jose Rep. Mike Honda's ire and Arab-Americans' criticism this week after he said the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II was for their own good.

Republican Howard Coble, 71, expressed a view of the internment that many of his generation still hold. His point, to a caller on a radio station, was that he didn't think the same fate should fall on Arab-Americans today, even though ``some of these Arab-Americans are probably intent on doing harm to us," just as, he said, some Japanese-Americans were then.

Coble's ignorance of history and of constitutional protections is particularly alarming. That's because he is the point person on legislation to expand surveillance and curb privacy protections, as chairman of the House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security.

The Japanese-American internment offers two history lessons, neither of which Coble gets.

One is about skepticism. Contrary to what the government claimed, there was never evidence of disloyalty among Japanese-Americans. The military trumped up or exaggerated its reports of spying and sabotage. Those unfounded claims fueled the anti-Japanese sentiment that fed the justification for internment.

The other lesson is that you don't protect victims by persecuting them.

``We were at war. They (Japanese-Americans) were an endangered species. For many of these Japanese-Americans, it wasn't safe for them to be on the street," Coble told radio listeners. Instead of guarding American citizens, the government rounded 120,000 of them up and imprisoned them.

Honda, as a child, was one of those Americans. This week, he introduced a resolution in Congress recognizing Feb. 19th, the day President Roosevelt signed the internment order in 1942, as a ``Day of Remembrance."

The resolution has relevance today, amid the fear of terror. Honda understands this; his colleague from North Carolina clearly doesn't.